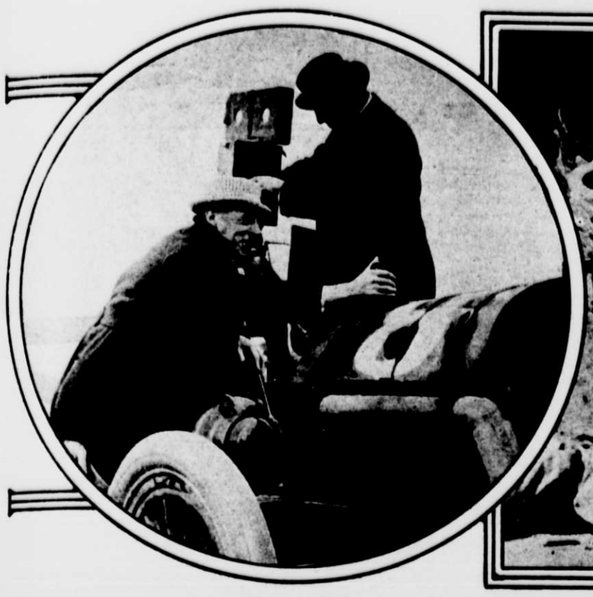
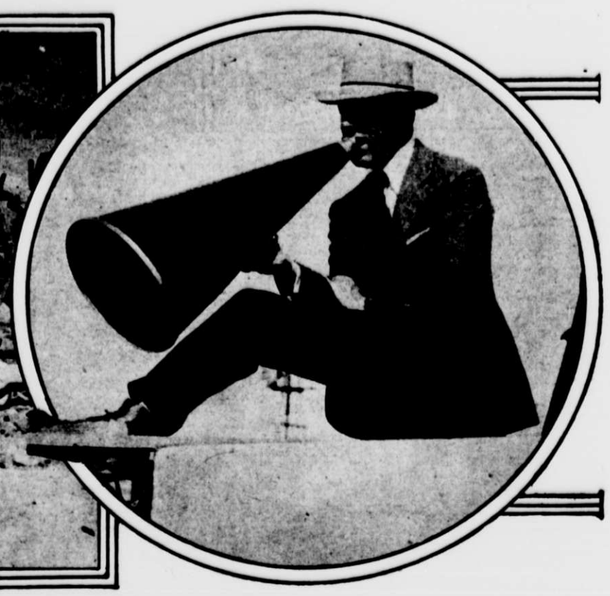
PRODUCING A PLAY ON A STAGE FIVE MILES WIDE



Auto from which pictures of the onrushing Ku Klux riders were taken.

Scene after the battle of Petersburg.



Mr. Griffith directing actors from top of sixty-foot tower.

D. W. Griffith's Great Idea and How He Worked Out Historically Accurate Battle Scenes With 18,000 Actors and 3,000 Horses

AN observing officer of a moving picture corporation was watching rehearsals for a little film drama one morning seven years ago when a complication developed and it was patent that, as arranged for, the idea, in the language of the studio, would not get over. One of the players in the company, a slender young leading man, went up to the producing director and said: "Why couldn't it be done so and so?" indicating his plan.

The producing director nodded emphatically. "Right!" he said, and it was right. Whereupon the observing officer first mentioned turned to the actor, saying seriously: "Why don't you try producing, Griffith?"

"I wouldn't mind having a chance to work out a few little ideas," was the answer.

"Work them out, then," was the decision.

Up at the Liberty Theatre during the last few weeks people are standing in a line which stretches from the box office nearly over to Seventh avenue, suffering for the privilege of paying $2 a seat in many cases, to see nothing but a moving picture drama. The man who produced that $2 movie is the man addressed in the studio seven years before, the man who said he had a few little ideas to work out.

He was Griffith then, now he is David Wark Griffith, for whom even the most surfeited regular dramatic critic had words of praise when that movie had its first night in New York and of whom also other men who study and observe rather than direct declare that he has raised the film drama to an art with a capital A, and that he has unfolded new possibilities, pioneered in hitherto unsuspected fields.

In brief, Mr. Griffith took "The Clansman," a novel by the Rev. Thomas Dixon, and from it evolved an ambitious spectacle for the camera in which, working on a stage roughly speaking five miles long and two miles deep, he employed altogether 18,000 persons and 3,000 horses. He delineated battle scenes conducted according to the records preserved in the War Department at Washington, using artillery, cavalry and infantry as they were used in a real battle of the civil war.

His artillery duels were real artillery duels, his cavalry charges were passed by the men who participated in such a charge fifty years before. His men died as men had died in the trenches of the South and they suffered just as the men who did suffer said they had. He built or caused to be built no less than five complete Southern towns, faithful to the last architectural detail, and he burned three of them.

He massed and handled great mobs of whites and negroes as history said the real mobs acted. He reproduced one theatre exactly life size and delineated the great national tragedy of the assassination of President Lincoln just as history says it occurred. He built the legislative halls of a Southern State and with an actual still photograph as a model brought back to life a scene in that chamber fifty years ago. Above all throughout two hours and forty minutes he ran the threads of a love story.

This is was that Mr. Griffith leaned back in his chair puffing contentedly at an after luncheon cigar, taking his first vacation in about fourteen months. He was at that moment digesting among other things four questions which would take several hours to answer.

"Who are you?"

"Where did you learn how?"

"How did you do this?"

"What will come after?"

Mr. Griffith told how he was born in Kentucky some thirty odd years ago, the son of Jacob Wark Griffith, a brevet Brigadier-General of the Confederate army. His family comes near to being eligible for about all the patriotic societies, for his grandfather was Capt. Daniel Griffith of the war of 1812. In the generation further on there was a great grandfather in the Revolutionary war. Before that time there were Griffiths in Virginia.

After the war, of course, the Griffiths of Kentucky had, like many other families, mainly their memories to live on—memories and the products of a farm on the edge of the blue grass. The boy was born in that situation, received his education at the nearby country school.

The wander year came to the boy at 20. In the meantime he had always liked to act in the dialogues at school Friday afternoons and a little later when they gave the plays at the Literary Society. In any event when he went out into the world he gravitated to Louisville and very promptly applied for a position with a modest little stock company which was giving everything from Shakespeare to Charles Hoyt at a local theatre.

He was engaged, as he says, because they needed somebody. Then there were seven years of the stage, now in road companies, now in repertoire, all the time getting up a little. He played with Gertrude Coghlan, Walker Whitesides and finally Nance O'Neil, in the last year a leading man.

Something else happened. In an odd moment on the road the young actor had written a short story or two and some verses. He came back to New York and sent them to a magazine, which promptly accepted them. Then he wrote a play, "The Fool and the Girl," and James K. Hackett took it. Another great romantic drama was begun, and its acceptance promised. This was in the latter part of 1906 and the early part of 1907.

"That ended the stage for me," he explained. "No more of the hardships. I was going to be an author and draw down royalties. I woke up in about five months.

"The Hackett play failed and I have always had a little bit of a sore spot over that. I know a little bit more about stage management now, you know. Then short story writing was not extra profitable and I came back to New York from the country and found the moving picture game growing."

He began writing moving picture scenarios then at $5 and $10 apiece. That was all right if you could turn out enough of them. There are limits, however, to the physical capacity of even such plots as they used in those days and the young man added moving picture acting to his other work. He went into the company of a corporation, the first one mentioned, studied the game as it was then, saw that it might be made an art and bided his time until the officer heard him make the suggestion to the producing director, whereupon another era was born.

There is no doubt the young manager grew a little more ambitious about that time. The corporation for which he worked had not been particularly prosperous, although to-day it is worth millions, but there was somebody in it wise enough not to impose any rules or regulations on the new director.

Perhaps the reader will remember a modest, haunting little film, "Pippa Passes," the representation of Browning's poem. Griffith did that and all it was was a day of a young girl with her ancient Italian guitar singing her little song ending: "God's in His Heaven; all's right in the world."

Then came "The Merchant of Venice," rather ambitious; "The Blot on the Escutcheon," "Enoch Arden," a sombre fancy; "Lines of White on a Sullen Sea," all of which led up to "Oil and Water," written by Mr. Griffith himself. A little more ambition and then came "A Corner in Wheat," the first pictures of which were modelled directly on Millet's "Gleaners," and the audience liked that.

"Just about that time," he put in, "it came to me that a wonderful thing could be done with 'The Life of Christ.' The divine tragedy has a universal appeal, and adequately done with reverence it could not fail of approval." He laughed. "I submitted my idea and it was approved, but when I got to talking about details, Palestine and Jerusalem, a great cast, for I had chosen two of the foremost actors in the world—an initial expenditure of thousands—the thermometer dropped. It was madness." He paused. "Do you know it is a little gratifying to me now that within the last few days I have been approached by a syndicate which has asked me to do that very same thing, and they have said that I need not worry about a little thing like $500,000 or a $1,000,000 if I need it."

By this time it is apparent Griffith had swung into his stride and a year ago or a little more came "Judith," using about 2,000 people, where they built forty foot concrete walls, wide enough to have a battle on.

Then came "The Clansman." It seems that the chief producing director, as Mr. Griffith was, changed from one company to another, and according to reports he did so at a salary that would pay the President's yearly salary of $75,000 and more. He wouldn't talk about that. In any event he had not worked long before he had the Dixon book handed over to him to read. He read it and lost interest in about everything else.

"I read the book," he says, "and I saw it. Not the book entirely, but as an opportunity for me to set forth, first, the birth of the South following the travail of the civil war.

"I saw a chance to tell the story of how they suffered through what I believe to be the most dramatic period in the history of the country—reconstruction. There was a chance to show what the South thinks of Lincoln; there was a chance to show that the negro of the South did not of his own volition degenerate into the human being who made the Ku Klux Klan necessary, but rather he was seduced by the unscrupulous adventurers, who exploited a situation for their own selfish ends.

"There was nothing of race in my idea, and may I say there is nothing of race antagonism in my production. It is simply the pictorializing of an epoch."

Taking the book, reading it and dreaming about it, however, did not do the work. There were eight months of incubation. First three men, and they were professors of colleges, were asked to work out the correct historical data. There were interviews with veterans of the civil war on most important points, recourse to maps and reports down at Washington and finally a patient county by county tour of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and North Carolina until Piedmont was discovered.

Then came the location of the battlefields, after which the veterans with their maps went forth to lay out a battlefield just as it was at Petersburg and just as it was in part during the march of Sherman's army from Atlanta to the sea. Where approved territory was found the experts went to work upon it.

If a road wound this way, if there was a brook or a river, or a house or a barn, that road, brook, house and barn were found or put in. If a town was needed along came an architect with his corps of builders and they put it up just as some gray haired old man remembered it.

They remembered burnings, and a town, two towns were put in—five altogether were built. One man remembered the burning of a town by night. Something must be done about that. A fireworks man said he could build bombs which exploding in the air would give enough light for the camera to work at night. Incidentally it may be added the bombs cost $80 apiece, but they did the work.

"Was it difficult to get the actors?"

"No," replied Mr. Griffith, "not difficult, but tedious. You see we advertised in the newspapers that we wanted so many persons, men, women and children. We established employment bureaus, so to speak, and made our selections."

"How about the negroes?"

"They were the easiest. The negro is a natural actor, and I do not mind saying that among the 4,500 of them we took out of the fields, out of the shops and from every other place we found some with remarkable talent. A producer some day may put forth the tragedy of the negro on the film—he will find men and women of that race fully competent."

Of course, it was explained, they did not use the 18,000 persons all the five or six months they were actually photographing the drama. While it is true that by the time he had finished his long term of study Mr. Griffith did not use a scrap of paper, a book or scenario, yet he had arranged it all in his mind.

The great multitude for the flight from Atlanta and the town scenes were not actually under employment longer than two weeks. Then it may be added that the expenses ran far up into the thousands every day.

"The only way we could handle them was by military discipline," said Mr. Griffith. "We laid out a camp for the whites and a camp for the blacks. We set up two commissaries. Then we divided our forces into sections, each section commanded by a captain who had his staff under him. That is how the picture was worked out.

"Every section leader in the big battle scenes or the town scenes kept his section, rehearsed it and looked after it. Complete telephone systems were installed for every section and the orders delivered from headquarters were megaphoned by the captains to their commands."

The headquarters alluded to in the battle scenes was a sixty foot tower in front of the whole scene. It was there that George W. Bitzer, "best camera man in the world," Mr. Griffith says, and five assistants set their cameras. Every scene it may be said was taken six times.

Finally when every move of every section had been gone over again and again in rehearsal, when the soldiers knew when to charge or fall back, when to die or drop, even when the artillery knew the exact second when to wheel into action and the cavalry had its time schedule perfect even to the exact place where a horse must stumble or fall, the section leaders came to headquarters.

Back in the hills the thousands were waiting. They dashed back to their commands. Word came that all was ready and to the beat of a watch under telephone orders the action began. The air filled with smoke—the soldiers appeared as if in a real fight. Trains of panic stricken refugees wound over the hills in flight, and then they stopped.

"We used the greatest number in all the scenes where they appear without reference to the position the pictures appear in the production," said Mr. Griffith. "That is always done. The multitudes were taken first and gradually the number was cut down until at last we had only the principals in their scenes.

"Some of the scenes which appear in order to-day were taken three or four months apart. That made more trouble, but it had to be done that way. You must remember exactly what the individual did the first time in order to preserve uniformity, exactly how he or she wore a hat, entered a house, wore the hair, or did anything else. That brings gray hair. Then we had a few little stunts.

"You remember that case where the negroes are shot and fall when the Ku Klux come into the town. The horses jump over them as they lie in the street. It took considerable persuasion to get men to do that, although the horses and their riders were the best trained obtainable. We took it up with some men. 'Boss, we won't do that for less'n $5 a day,' they said. They got it.

"Take another case in the guerrilla invasion of the town. It may be recalled that a man shot falls from the roof of a front porch head first on the ground. Many think the fall is made by a dummy. A real man does it and practised in a fire net until he got his fall just right, timed exactly as it had to be done to fit in with the scene.

"There is one case where a rider coming out of a house makes a flying leap into the saddle over the tail of his horse. That took time and it does not show, but the man who did that had to jump over a railing encumbered by a robe.

"Many things were done in the work that do not appear in the film. There are twenty-five field guns in the battle scene pounding away and they were too far away for the eye of the camera. Houses are burned of which you catch only a vague glow, people are fleeing over the hills and you can hardly see them."

The actual work was all over in five months, Mr. Griffith said. From their first camp they went to California for interiors and the honeymoon scenes, the allegories and theatre scene showing the assassination of President Lincoln.

"The theatre was the exact size of Ford's in Washington," Mr. Griffith explained, "and it was an exact duplicate. Old prints gave us every detail even down to the appearance of Laura Keene and her company in 'The American Cousin.' We sought long before we got a man who could satisfy us as President Lincoln, and every man who became a member of his Cabinet was required to look like the original in size and general makeup.

"It was there that detail became almost overpowering. Men who lived in the old days were besieged. How did this man walk; how did he gesture; how did he wear his clothes; did he have any mannerisms? I tell you it kept a great many people awake nights. We took the famous painting of the surrender of Lee and we never laid it down until I believe that every man in it had an exact double before our cameras."

Thus it all came out. There were more months as the film was perfected and made ready for the public. But at last it was all done.

"Now what is the future of the moving picture?"

The man being interviewed lifted his hands. "Why, there are no limits to its possibilities in artistic work. This is only child's play.

Mr. Griffith posing his extras for the panic flight of the citizens out of Piedmont, S. C.
Above—The camera platform from which the battle scenes were made.

Ford's Theatre Reproduced in Actual Size and Five Southern Towns Built and Burned for the Sake of a Moving Picture